

LUCKLEY HOUSE SCHOOL

WHAT THE GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE SAYS

THE
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GUIDE



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The Good Schools Guide is the UK's number one school guide, helping parents in every aspect of choosing the best education for their children. Trusted by parents for 35 years, the guides include impartial and candid school reviews as well as in-depth articles on education-related issues.

Reviews are available in print, online to subscribers or through The Good Schools Guide's expert consultants.

Uniquely, each school is selected on merit alone. No one can buy their way into The Good Schools Guide's good books. And from famous names to local treasures, the writers visit every single school, interview the head, speak to pupils and parents, analyse academic performance and challenge the marketing hype. Result? The fearsomely frank and funny reviews for which they are famous.

Some 1,300 schools are currently reviewed. In addition, The Good Schools Guide website has details of all 30,000+ schools in the UK, plus a wealth of insightful information on virtually all English schools - even if the writers have not actually visited and reviewed them.

The Good Schools Guide website also provides a comprehensive collection of advice and education data on state and independent schools, tutors, special needs, university choice and much more. In addition, our name is known worldwide for tailor-made advice and support given by educational consultants who help individual families as they make important decisions on school choices.

The Good Schools Guide is independent, forthright, well-informed and unbiased, which gives it unique authority and has earned the trust of parents and educational organisations worldwide.



THE HEAD



Since September 2020, Areti Bizior MBA, BSc BEd, PGCE from University of South Africa. Seven years at St George's Ascot, three at Queen Anne's, Caversham, thence to Downe House as deputy head in 2013. ISI inspector; former governor of nearby Holme Grange School; on executive committee of Boarding Schools Association. Learnt 'an incredible amount' at Downe - now pleased to 'make a difference', bringing the good practice that she's seen along the way. Wants to capitalise on 'sense of momentum', focusing on 'aspiring to your personal best', an aim which we feel encapsulates the ethos here. Quotes a prefect who, in recent assembly, 'talked about working towards your goal little and often - before you know it, you've climbed the mountain'. 'Everyone comments on how happy the children seem here, but to be happy you have to be resilient, flexible, content with yourself.'



Inviting, unthreatening office with fresh flowers, gas fireplace and pupil art hung tastefully above the desk. Pupils find her calm, easy manner reassuring - no wonder they just pop in. 'Some come for a chat, others to visit Copper the dog - she's so popular we're going to need a sign-up sheet. They know there's always cakes up here too'. The other day a group swung by to sing her a Beegees song - 'I think they thought that's my era', she laughs. Emotionally astute: 'younger ones come in pretending it's just for a chat, and then they'll say "by the way..." and I know I'm getting the real reason why they're here'. Big windows overlooking school grounds: 'I love seeing them go about their day'. We take a moment to do just that, observing pupils milling around, many lugging sports kits towards after school activities. When she spots one boy chatting to a new friend, she comments, 'it's lovely to see him branching out'.



Ten years ago, school faced an existential crisis when numbers got perilously low, dipping below 200. Mrs Bizior's predecessor turned things around (there are now over 300 'lucky Lucklies', as one parent termed them). Even then, some feel the school had begun to lose direction again before Mrs Bizior joined, 'bringing renewed energy and vision'. 'She's got a business head on her', say parents - indeed, currently doing an MBA at UCL. Objective is to grow slightly but 'it's important that Luckley remains small in number, big in opportunity', she says.

Keen netballer in her schooldays and will still always 'grab a ball if I'm passing the courts and see boarders playing in the evening'. Also practices karate at a local club. Lives onsite with husband, in IT, and teenage son, at a nearby all boys' school - 'he loved his taster day here but having mum as head was just too much'. Parents appreciate that she's a mum - 'she knows how it is'.

ENTRANCE



Usually 40 places in Year 7 and 15 in Year 9, though numbers can be flexible if demand high. Pupils from huge range of primaries and preps, and with a broad range of ability.

Taster days for all those interested. Cognitive ability tests, plus English for overseas applicants.

Head interviews everyone. The 11+ hopefuls create an autobiographical storyboard in advance - 'some are covered in photos and glitter; others have just a few words on them', but 'if they're a bit shy, it's a way to get them talking'. Characteristic of student-centred approach.

Ultimately looking for pupils with diverse skills and interests.

EXIT

Half leaves after GCSEs, usually for BTECs or bigger settings. 'The reasons people leave are the reasons people stay - Luckley's a small school and everybody knows your name', say staff.

University destinations vary with cohorts, which are too small to establish patterns. Royal Holloway, Reading, Cardiff come up. Odd few medics and students to Oxbridge, though none in 2021.

LATEST RESULTS

In 2021, 61 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 66 per cent A*/A at A level (86 per cent A*-B). In 2019 (the last year when exams took place), 30 per cent 9-7 at GCSE; 25 per cent A*/A at A level (51 per cent A*-B).



TEACHING & LEARNING

Gentle academics. 'Teachers get to know you really well', said a pupil.

Until Year 11, groups of up to 18 (12 in practical subjects). GCSE options as small as four. Happy to run an A level class of one. 'Means we can tailor teaching to the group', say staff.

Curriculum starts broad, with 21 subjects in Year 7. Three languages in Year 7 whittled down to two in Year 8 and one or two in Year 9. Year 9s choose their practical subjects and there's an optional HPQ research project. Pupils particularly love food tech (as, we suspect, do parents – seriously delicious-looking focaccia being rustled up when we popped in).

No subject snobbery - 'If you're really good at photography they make a big deal out of it,' says one pupil, 'rather than going on about how you need As in maths and English'.

Unusually flexible - anything possible. The school's size allows for bespoke experiences and timetabling and has the capacity to tailor a student's academic diet to fit them. While most take at least the standard nine GCSEs, some do just six. Majority takes three A levels but the school can accommodate students taking just one, perhaps with a practical EPQ alongside it.

Small sixth form, which has pros and cons - having one or two in humanities subject may limit debate, though 'we get better at countering our own points, which is what you need for the exam anyway', says loyal pupil. Head emulating breadth of Year 7 at the top of the school, introducing classical civilisations and politics. Largely taught in dedicated centre, newly refurbished in parts and due for further development. Bright, fresh classrooms with seminar-style table, big whiteboards and flatscreen TVs. Sixth form retention a focus - parents all told us that their offspring would stay if enough others did so. Everyone's hoping for a snowball effect.

LEARNING SUPPORT & SEN

Learning support and SEN 'We're better now at knowing what we can offer for pupils with SEN', says academic deputy, who looks carefully at ed psych reports and talks to families in depth when they apply. Twenty-five on SEN register. One-to-one support provided, progress carefully tracked. Many more access study skills provision laid on by learning support. 'We didn't look anywhere else', says mum of a girl with dyslexia, 'because of the school's reputation for SEND'. 'Proactive' support and lots of 'coping strategies'. Placement test identifies those who'll need EAL support. Can work towards IELTS with specialist teacher.



THE ARTS & EXTRA CURRICULAR

Beautifully designed music room with wacky acoustic-enhancing ceiling. One-third have individual lessons. Recording room and music tech facilities too. Many music scholars also members of national choirs and orchestras - we watched soulful rendition of Snow Patrol.



Theatre small but perfectly formed in glassy new development complete with smart foyer for interval drinks. We saw sixth formers rehearsing with great maturity – characteristically, school offers A level in lighting and sound for those who don't fancy the stage. Lots of prizes in ISA lockdown monologue competitions, including first place in two categories. Musical this year is Wizard of Oz, seniors doing Pride and Prejudice – pupils hotly anticipating outcome of auditions when we visited.



Art and design provision broad up to A level. Colourful pupil work imaginatively displayed around the school (monsters made from cheese graters a first for us) - genuinely decorative rather than 'we ought to have some pupil work up'. Studios appropriately well-loved - tables painty, printing press inky, shelves heaving with pottery due for the kiln. At A level, photography, fine art and graphic design students work happily alongside one another. Where numbers are small, Years 12 and 13 come together, with second year A level students acting as mentors to first years. 'We work hard to make sure that everybody can do what they want to do. It makes it dynamic - fine artists learn from photographers about slow shutter speeds and then go away and recreate the effect themselves.'



SPORT

New director of sport has big ideas and the confidence to 'knock on the head's door until she says yes' ('he's very competitive', she chuckles). Provision not previously a priority - self-fulfilling, of course, because school didn't attract traditionally sporty children. Strong athletes (recent accolades in cricket, trampolining, horse-riding, kayaking) predominantly got their fix at external clubs. Now proactively engaging and nurturing talent. New Athlete Development Programme is 'elite pathway' for scholars or promising individuals. We saw Year 9 ADPs doing some exhausting-looking coordination and agility work. Full-time strength and conditioning coach devises tailored fitness plans and talks about oxygen deficits and other such elite athlete things. We didn't fancy a bounce on the new AirTrack but heard that it's ideal for jumps and flips.

Annual sports dinner being held the evening of our visit. No hierarchy of skills here, and sporting success is celebrated just as much as academics. For mere mortals, 'sport for all is still there'. Priority is making it fun, with small teams (eg 9-a-side football) creating more contact with the ball. 'Level ups' and 'special powers' engage those who'd rather be in front of a PlayStation. And here's that flexibility, again - judo and fencing introduced for current year 9s, because department reckons that they'd enjoy them. Cross-country well attended by students and staff. Other options include climbing, volleyball, dance, trampolining.

Sports hall houses most of the action, with ergs and bikes on the mezzanine. Large multi-use games area in development (diggers hard at work): all-weather pitch and floodlighting will allow year-round fixtures. Handy app now posts matches and results, though parents wish there was a bit more warning about logistics and away matches ('we might want to go and see them!').



BOARDERS

Twenty full or weekly boarders as we write (plus flexis) - plan is to grow this to forty.

Nationalities and languages mixed within rooms – most full boarders east Asian. Rooms freshly painted in neutrals with space on the walls for reminders of home. Bathrooms spotless.

New head of boarding has come from Milton Abbey (where ninety-five percent board), and is putting into place jam-packed activity programme for the weekends (no Saturday lessons or fixtures here). Two trips go out every weekend - every boarder must go on at least one of them. Theme parks, waterparks, cinema trips - nothing too worthy.

More day students now staying for evenings and the odd night ('when she fancies a sleepover with friends'), as well as joining weekend activities. Boarding community thus feels bigger than it really is, and at under £50 a night, parents are slowly realizing that a night at school is 'cheaper than a babysitter', laughs head.

During the day, boarders are day pupils - 'they wave goodbye to house parents in the morning and don't return until after activities'. Well integrated with day pupils. Parents and pupils welcome the international diversity that boarders bring.



ETHOS & HERITAGE



Founded in 1918 by one Miss Bertha Drake, a 'deeply religious woman', 'to provide a broadbased education, based on Christian principles, to allow girls to develop their full potential' (according to charming 1970s history). Various guises since: became Luckley-Oakfield School in 1959 having merged with another girls' school; rebranded to Luckley House in 2013. Ethos hasn't changed, though - 'girls were given considerable freedom of choice regarding work and activities', meaning there was 'no typical "Luckley girl"'. Since 2015 there have been Luckley boys, too, but those values remain. Main building a neat 1907 red-bricker - a touch of period charm but no danger of any nasty drafts or rickety staircases. Inside it's warm and welcoming - log fire smoldering in the oakpaneled fireplace, thick carpets and smelly candles that you'd choose for home ('Frosted Zest with a Hint of Mint', if you're interested - much nicer than it sounds). Other buildings more modern, lots of glass and colourful statement walls.

Classrooms inviting and lively - top marks to Spanish for the rainforest-themed garlands ('because they speak Spanish in lots of places where they have rainforests', explains our young guide earnestly) and textiles, where we saw lampshades mounted on the wall with real lightbulbs inside. Lots of gardens to explore including a zipwire ('where you'll find Year 8 at lunchtime', we are reliably informed).

School feels more modern even in the short time since Mrs Bizior joined. 'The general look of the school has been refreshed', says one parent, adding, 'if I'm paying school fees it's reasonable to want to sit on a nice bench and look at nice signage'. Some grumbles about systems moving faster than the staff who are meant to implement them, or information coming home at the last minute. 'All homework is meant to be on Doodle', says one mum, 'but gaps in what's been uploaded mean we spend a lot of time emailing teachers to check'. Flexibility a big appeal to parents who are looking for a school that does not put academics front and centre - 'it's very balanced between academics and life skills', says one mum, who 'wasn't that interested in how many Oxbridge candidates they had'.

'They've really got it right,' when it comes to pressure, says another, comparing it with other schools where they 'talk the talk but don't actually do it'. 'Parents and children are looking for those transferable skills now, rather than just grades', and pupils seem to be developing those in spades.



Bonfire night laser show this year organised by a pupil - 'he put together a plan and presented it to the committee' - and prefects take on a lot of responsibility.

Christianity remains central too, though you won't see crucifixes in classrooms. 'It's more about a way of life', says headed, 'love and service are core values, good human values'.

Visiting chaplains once a month, often from parent body - 'I tell them that assembly must be based on a feelgood message about life'. Popular Bible & Cake club, part of wellbeing programme, provides opportunity for Bible study and games.

Very 'normal', say parents. We felt that, too - lots of staff have worked in the state sector; lots of pupils have been to primary schools rather than preps; fees are low compared with other schools in the area. We came across a number of families who had moved to Luckley House having found their child struggling in a big comprehensive, or who had felt let down by state provision during lockdown. Very unfussy and accessible - a long way from some of the big, formal schools in the Royal County.

PASTORAL CARE, INCLUSIVITY AND DISCIPLINE

'Phenomenal', we hear. Head engendering 'sense of belief', 'making aspiration more overt'. Marketing material peppered with pupil quotes around this theme: 'I believe I can help world leaders'; 'I believe I can win a BAFTA' etc. 'They really did write those themselves!', says head, who thinks a lot about 'how we can get them to believe'.

Some year groups in the middle of the school girl-heavy; oldest and youngest evenly balanced. Arrival of boys 'changed behaviour', say staff, 'the girls came out of their shells, became more expressive, shared opinions more quickly'.

New prefect-run mentoring scheme - Year 13s paired with younger students who want someone to chat to. Prefects given significant responsibility (they'd run assembly that morning) and represent student voice, acting as role models to younger students, who feel that they know them well.



Pupils not as socially sophisticated as counterparts at glossier schools – Everyone's Invited website didn't hit their radar though school ran sessions around the issues raised. Hotch-potch of personalities and types, with no pressure to conform.

Support sessions for those approaching public exams. 'Safe Drive, Stay Alive' program in Reading for Year 12.

Lots of vertical integration – we saw nice interactions between older and younger students. Socials encourage cohesion within sixth form, including bowling and lasertag in Wokingham, black tie soirée and Christmas trip into London to see a show. PSHE, or 'life skills', recently restructured. Students feed into what's covered ('gives them ownership') and school supplements as necessary.

Food very good - 'a full, balanced, meat and two veg approach', say happy parents. Excellent salad bar and range of hot options in bustling canteen. Chicken burgers a particular favourite. As we tucked in, boys peered in at our plates to check out what was for lunch – 'Oi!', staff scolded in jest – rapport between teachers and pupils respectful with a smattering of humour. Sixth form share well-equipped kitchen with boarders; huge jar of biscuits gets filled every morning (and demolished by lunchtime).



School counsellor available for students and staff. Form tutors first port of call for pastoral concerns, though pupils feel comfortable talking to any member of staff if they're worried about something.

PUPILS & PARENTS

Minibuses cover 20-mile radius: Maidenhead, Farnborough, Windsor, Fleet etc. Buses run once in the morning but twice in the afternoon, so that parents 'can cherry-pick the length of the day,' says head. 'We are really flexible about suiting the family' – lots of busy working parents who appreciate that support.

Parents generally have no assumptions about privately educating their children or worries about keeping up with the Joneses. The school has a history, but it's not a Latin-songs-and-glory-on-the-rugby-pitch sort of place. Perhaps it's adding boys to a girls' school, rather than vice versa; perhaps it's relatively low fees; perhaps it's the school's size. Whatever the reasons, Luckley is a grounded, local school rather than a status symbol, and parents are self-selecting.



MONEY MATTERS

Means-tested bursaries available. Fee remission for children of clergy. Scholarships for Year 7, 9 and 12 entry (academic, sport, music, art, drama) worth between five and 20 percent. Exceptional GCSE performance rewarded with £100 to spend on something inspired by their academic studies.

THE LAST WORD

A school on the up – hence this, its first inclusion in the Guide. Parents rave about the flexible, caring provision that this 'little gem' has to offer. What kind of child would Luckley not suit, we wondered? 'Someone super academic, perhaps?' says one mum, before pausing- 'actually, I know some really clever children who would benefit from the social skills they'd pick up.' A completely contrasting offering from the better-known schools in the area, and all the richer for it. With a zingy head and modern approach, we have high hopes for this new era of Luckley House.



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